

Reflections and directions: a personal note

by **ROBERT CHAMBERS**

Perspective and limitations

Sixteen years ago, in April 1988, when a group of us met in IDS to review the state of play with RRA (Rapid Rural Appraisal), and IIED agreed to start *RRA Notes*, something was in the air. RRA had evolved fast. The 1985 International Conference on RRA at Khon Kaen in Thailand had shown how much was coming together: agroecosystem analysis, evolved by Gordon Conway and his colleagues at Chiang Mai University, had contributed transects and observation, sketch mapping and diagramming; semi-structured interviewing had come into its own; and the complexity, diversity and dynamism of farming systems were better recognised, as were the value and validity of so much indigenous technical knowledge. The confluence of these streams was turbulent and exhilarating, a liberating edge of chaos of emergence and creativity. Though RRA was still in 1988 a minority activity looked down on by the mainstream as 'quick-and-dirty' and lacking rigour, we were more and more confident that we knew better. Much had happened, and more was on the way. But for all the sense of expectation, I do not think any of us had any idea just how imminent so many innovations were, nor how radical they would be, nor how widespread their impacts.

Any account of what has happened since, of what we

have learnt, and of what the future may hold, is personal and fallible. I have been biased and wrong in the past and will surely be biased and wrong in some of what follows. I tend to criticise and undervalue what normal professionals embrace as rigour, to look for and overemphasise gaps between disciplines and professions, to see any glass as half full rather than half empty, to attribute too much to activities I have been involved in, and to underestimate or overlook what has been done by others and elsewhere.

This last shows up in a North-centric, and IDS/IIED-centric view of change. As the contributions to *RRA Notes* and *PLA Notes* show, much of the published analysis and writing about the innovations of the early days, and even now, has been by people from the North. My writing these reflections is yet another example. But most of the innovations of the past 16 years have been in the South. I think of the many in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean who have been such outstanding but unsung pioneers. They have often been too busy, too committed, too disempowered by English as a foreign medium, or too disinclined in other ways, to write up and share their experience. Many innovators, North or South, also do not recognise the significance of what they have done. Gordon Conway ended the editorial in *RRA Notes* 1:

The aim of the notes is to share a wide set of experiences and ideas – our success though depends on receiving contributions from practitioners. PLEASE WRITE TO US.

The intention was informality, allowing and including

Box 1: February 1988: Abicho, near Dessie in Wollo, Ethiopia.

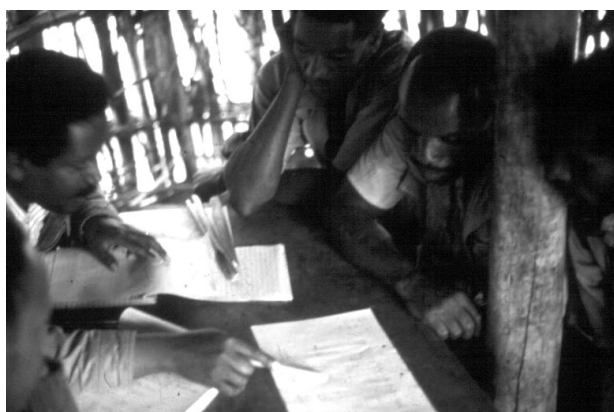


Photo: Robert Chambers

Part of RRA training by IIED which Gordon Conway led. A scales-from-the-eyes moment (at least for me). On the basis of what the farmers had said in response to the semi-structured interview method we had evolved, the interviewers (left) drew a histogram of agricultural labour requirements by month. When asked to look at it, the farmers said, 'You have drawn what we said'.

spelling mistakes. In the event, those who have written have done a good service but have not been truly representative. May the North-South imbalance continue to be corrected. Many will join in hoping that *PLA Notes* in its reincarnation as *Participatory Learning and Action* will draw contributors more evenly from all over the world. PLEASE WRITE TO US bears repeating.

What has happened?

Methodological innovation began to accelerate in 1988. The RRA training in Ethiopia in February-March 1988 (Ethiopian Red Cross Society 1998) and the field explorations of AKRSP [add full name] in India (McCracken in *RRA Notes* 4), in which Anil Shah, Jenny McCracken, Meera Shah, Parmesh Shah and others took part, gave tantalising hints of what was coming. There were the farmers in Ethiopia who showed they could understand an RRA histogram of seasonal workloads, saying 'You have drawn what we said'. There was the village head in Gujarat who turned the outsiders' sketch map 'upside down' to make it intelligible. Soon the term PRA began to be used— in Kenya for a form of community action planning, and in India for a multiplicity of group-visual and other participatory processes.

An explosion of activity then took place. I may attribute too much to what happened in India because I had the brilliant good fortune to be there for two years in 1989-91 when

Box 2: May 1991: First RRA training in Nepal, near Lumle.



A farmer points out a missing house on a 1:5,000 aerial photograph taken five years earlier. The house was more recent.



During the first PRA training in Nepal, with no trainers present, farmers showed days of rain by month with seeds, then volume with sticks, and then an unusual weather pattern they said occurred one year in five.

Photos: Robert Chambers

many were innovating and I was free to travel, see what they were doing, learn from them, and write. The magnitude of the change can be seen by comparing where we were with *RRA Notes* 1 in June 1988 and where we had reached 20 months later with the bumper *RRA Notes* 13 based on the Bangalore workshop of February 1991. This brought together Indian innovations and experiences with PRA. The great revelations were the methods, and the notion that 'They Can Do It' – that local people, women and men, poor and rich, able

Box 3: MYRADA staff and participants in the first South-South Sharing Workshop.

Photo: Robert Chambers

January 1992: The first South-South Sharing Workshop.

Participants included friends from: Canada-Vietnam (Bardolf Paul), Tanzania (Emanuel and another), Colombia, Ecuador, Ghana (Selina Adjebeng-Asem), India (Jimmy Mascarenhas, Prem Kumar), Kenya (Elkanah Odembo), Nigeria (David Atte and one other), the Philippines (Tootsie Dilig and another), Senegal (Bara Guèye), Sudan (Omar Mohamed), the UK (Robert Chambers), Vietnam, and Zimbabwe (Saiti Makuku).

The Workshop was organised by MYRADA (Jimmy Mascarenhas and others, ActionAid (Sam Joseph and others), and AKRSP (India; Meera Kaul Shah, Parmesh Shah, Anil Shah and others), with villagers in Karnataka and Gujarat also as hosts.

or not able to read and write, were capable of complex mapping, diagramming and analysis to an extent that few if any of us 'professionals' had ever dreamt. To take an example, in May 1991 unschooled farmers in Nepal used seeds and sticks to show days and volumes of monthly rainfall. In 'But how does it compare with the REAL data?' (*RRA Notes* 14) Gerry Gill's meticulous analysis showed the farmer's data to be richer and more relevant for agriculture (for example, showing snowfall in unusual years) than the 20 years daily rainfall data from nearby Lumle Agricultural Research Station. Moreover, they also included a five-yearly abnormal year with snowfall, which the station did not record. Also in 1991 ICRISAT (International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics) endorsed the radical video which Michel Pimbert and PV Satheesh had made: 'Participatory Research with Women Farmers'. This, like Jacqui Ashby's earlier CIAT (International Center for Tropical Agriculture) video 'The IPRA Method', was revolutionary, even shocking, for many agricultural scientists. Already in 1991 the main markers were there: the major participatory group-

visual methods had emerged, and the crucial importance of behaviour and attitudes in facilitation was well recognised.

The timeline in the editorial gives an overview of the sequence of some significant events. *RRA Notes* 13 was a landmark. Many copies were printed, photocopied and distributed around the world to interested people and to nascent networks. The early 1990s were then a phase of training and dissemination, of networks starting up, and of demands for PRA to be used coming from national and international NGOs, aid agencies and Governments. The Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Livelihoods Programme in IIED (then, the Sustainable Agriculture Programme) played a big part in this, not only editing, publishing and disseminating *RRA Notes* but even more importantly, conducting training in over a dozen countries. IDS started a small resource centre, coordinated the abstracting of documents, and tried to encourage and support emergent networks.

Their funding and international access and contacts enabled IIED and IDS to play these roles in the early stages and simultaneously to support shifts from North to South and exchanges from South to South¹. The first South-South sharing workshop, in India, in February 1992 was initiated by IDS but hosted, organised and facilitated in the field by Jimmy Mascarenhas and MYRADA (Mysore Resettlement and Development Agency) Sam Joseph and ActionAid, and Meera Kaul Shah and Parmesh Shah and AKRSP (Aga Khan Rural Support Programme). Later ones originated more and more in initiatives by NGOs in India and elsewhere. The seminal *Participatory Learning and Action: A trainer's guide* compiled by four key innovators and trainers in IIED – Jules Pretty, Irene Guijt, Ian Scoones and John Thomson – was published in 1995 and drew together much of the experience of the first half-dozen years. At the time, it was widely distributed for free and had, and continues to have, a huge circulation and influence, still selling around a thousand copies a year. The *ABC of PRA* (Kumar, 1996) that came out a year later was also widely distributed free and very influential, and came from an international South-South workshop on attitudes and behaviour. It was convened in India jointly by Somesh Kumar and ActionAid India, and by John Devavaram and SPEECH (Society of Peoples' Education and Economic Change) and 24 of the 27 participants were from the South.

Throughout the 1990s, meetings and networking continued to shift from North to South. Early PRA network initiatives in India, Nepal, Kenya, Senegal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh,

¹ Funders (in alphabetical order) included the Aga Khan Foundation, Danida, ODA (now DFID), the Ford Foundation, Novib, the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, SDC (Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation), SAREC, Sida and others.

Box 4: February 1992 The first South-South Workshop, with AKRSP in Kabripathar village, Gujarat.



Front row, left to right: Lê Minit Tuê (Vietnam), Rutcheli Dilig (Tootsie) (Philippines), Elcy Corrales (Colombia), Oluwayomi David Atte (Nigeria), Mohammed Omer Mukhier (Sudan), Emmanuel Youze (Tanzania), Selina Adjebeng-Asem (Ghana), Lorena Navallasca (Philippines), German Salazar (Ecuador). Back row left to right Lembulung ole Kosyando (Tanzania), Robert Chambers (UK), Bara Guèye (Senegal), Adejo Odoh (Nigeria), Elkanah Absalom (Kenya), Bardolf Paul (Canada/Vietnam), Saiti Makuku (Zimbabwe).

Photo: Robert Chambers

and South Africa were followed by tens of others. The first meeting of PRA networks was hosted by IIED in London in **1996**. The second, **the following year**, was hosted by NEPAN in Nepal. During this same period, the network of Resource Centres for Participatory Learning and Action (RCPLA) was initiated and launched by IIED. Later, in 2001, the coordination of the RCPLA network moved to India and was taken up by PRAXIS. When practitioners from South and North met, the first time was at IDS Sussex, the second at Bangalore and Madurai, and the third in Calcutta. These workshops issued statements, heavy with concerns and warnings about quality, ethics, behaviour and attitudes, and the dangers of abuse when going to scale. The first – *Sharing Our Concerns* – was published in 1995 in the first issue of the renamed *PLA Notes*. The second – *Sharing Our Experience: an Appeal to Donors and Governments* – was published in *ABC of PRA* and widely circulated to aid agencies.

During these early years of PRA there were flows, counter-flows and exchanges in many directions, with a mutually reinforcing egalitarianism. A growing flow was from South to North, as trainers from the South (Meera Shah, Parmesh Shah, John Devavaram, Bimal Phnuyl and others), and Northerners like Andrea Cornwall, Carolyn Jones and Tilly Sellers returning with experience from the South, introduced PRA approaches and methods to the North (see Flower

Box 5: South-South Workshop on PRA: Attitudes and Behaviour, Bangalore and Madurai, India 1-10 July 1996.

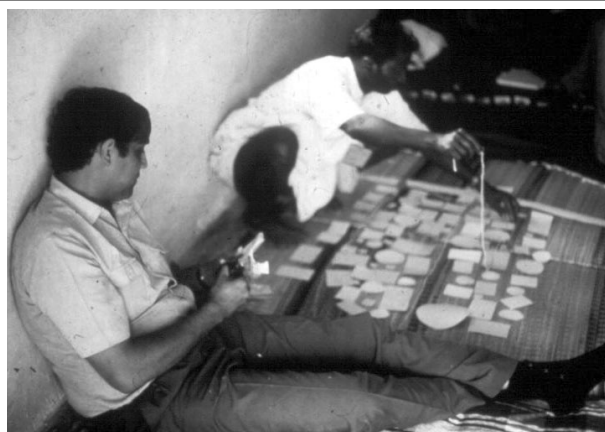


Left to Right :
1st row left to right: P.V.Satheesh, Deirdre Wright, Malini Venkatadri, Mallika Samaranayake, Sheelu Francis, Farhana Faruqi, Neela Mukherjee. 2nd row left to right: N. Narayanasamy, John Devavaram, Gemechu Gedenu, G.B. Adhikari, Haryo Habirono, Abu Hena Mallik. 3rd row left to right: Kamal Kar, Lars Johansson, Kamal Phuyal, Rashida Dohad, Somesh Kumar, Saiti Makuku, Robert Chambers. 4th row left to right: S. Rangasamy, Shen Maglinte, Shashigo Gerbu
Participants not in the photo: We missed you Arunodayam Erskine, Fiona Hinchcliffe, Sam Joseph, Ravi Jayakaran and Jimmy Mascarenhas.

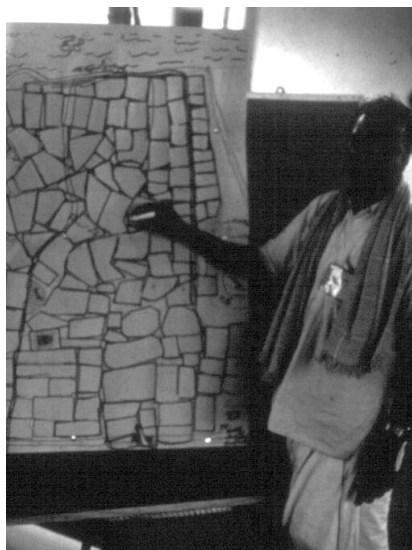
Photo: Robert Chambers

and Johnson, this issue).

The spirit of improvisation and innovation generated and continues to generate an astonishing range of methods and applications. The creativity, diversity and thrill of the visual methods was at first almost hypnotic. With time the centre of attention shifted to the extraordinary diversity of applications of not just the methods, but of participatory behaviours and approaches, by no means just those that carried the label PRA. What began with agriculture, natural resources and community planning fanned out inclusively and intermingled to include participation in almost every major domain of human social activity. Reflect for empowerment and literacy (see Archer and Goreth, this issue) and Stepping Stones for HIV/AIDS (Welbourn, 1995) stand out for their exceptional originality, spread and impact. Special issues of RRA/PLA Notes presented much of the rich diversity. An example is *PLA Notes 29: Performance and participation*. This had contributions on theatre for development, participatory monitoring and cultural feedback, role-play to transform attitudes and behaviour, forum and legislative theatre, dramatic behaviour in participatory training, using participatory group activities to understand psycho-social strategies for coping with conflict, and participatory video; and *PLA Notes 39:*

Box 6: March 1990: Seganahalli Village, Karnataka.

Jimmy Mascarenhas and the village water controller who is making a map of the fields (paper) and channels (string) below the village tank.



The water controller presenting his completed map to the community

Popular communications added more. The tools and approaches for empowerment and communication now include community radio and others mentioned in other articles (see e.g. Abah, this issue) such as report cards, participatory budgeting, citizen's juries and many others amounting to 'a vast array' (Gaventa, this issue) of innovative forms of public participation and deliberation.

These illustrate how a creative proliferation of participatory methods, approaches and applications has accompanied the expanding frontier agendas of development. In older domains, these have deepened and diversified, as reflected in this issue – sexual and reproductive health and rights (Gordon

August 1990: Gerebir Village, Ranchi District, Bihar. Social mapping with seed types representing castes



Photo: Robert Chambers

Photo: Robert Chambers

and Cornwall), HIV/AIDS (Welbourn), gender (Kanji), children and youth (Chawla and Johnson), urban applications (Patel and Satterthwaite), participatory communications (Abah), Reflect (Archer and Goreth), poverty and ill-being (Pettit and White), applications in the North (Flower and Johnson) and natural resource management (Pimbert). In newer domains such as critical reflection (Cornwall and Guijt), rights and advocacy (Pettit and Musyoki) and citizen participation, policy and governance (Gaventa), so much is happening so fast that it is difficult for publications to keep up. And remarkably and crucially for the future, all of these, older and newer, are converging to focus more and more on power, relationships and the personal dimension (see below).

So now 16 years since the first issue of *RRA Notes*, there is much to digest, and much to learn. Each of us will have our own ideas about the main lessons. Here are some of mine.

What have we learnt?

On the negative side, much has been learnt about bad practice, especially through going to scale too fast and the contradictions between participation and top-down drives and demands. Much has been learnt about embedded obstacles to participation, notably in institutional cultures and practices and in individual mindsets, values, attitudes and behaviours. Seeing how these interlock these provokes realism and clarifies what needs to change. Unfortunately, large development organisations and most of those who work in them still only rarely recognise how radically they need to change their procedures, incentives and relationships if they are to practice and promote participation in more than just name.

On the positive side, there is much to celebrate and build on. For example, we have learnt that:

'They can do it'

It is not just the often dramatic learning (almost 'scales from the eyes' in some personal accounts) that poor and marginalized people can make complex and detailed maps and diagrams, and conduct their own analysis. It is a wider generic learning, resonating with work with children, people who are disabled, the mentally disturbed, sex workers, poor people, women, the marginalized... and others who are looked down upon, that people who are thus 'lowers' have far greater capabilities than 'uppers' usually believe. What they often lack is self-confidence, opportunity and encouragement. Given these, they can surprise not only others but themselves with what they are able to do.

Difference matters

The big problems and disincentives which prevent or deter participation by those who are poor, marginalized and discriminated against – women, girls, the destitute, the disabled, those of low caste, immigrants, refugees, members of minorities, and so on – are better recognised. Experience has been gained with the special, patient committed efforts needed for their empowerment and willing inclusion.

PRA approaches and methods can open up hidden and sensitive subjects

Contrary to much common belief, well facilitated group-visual approaches can enable people to share and analyse difficult subjects. Examples are sexual behaviour and reproductive health (Gordon and Cornwall, this issue), violence in various forms (Moser and McIlwaine, 2004) and open defecation leading to community-led total sanitation (e.g. Patel; [insert the other water ones] this issue; and Kar, 2003).

Behaviour, attitudes and good facilitation matter more than methods

In the very early days of PRA, the methods were almost transfixing in their effect, as we watched with wonderment at the maps, matrices, models, systems diagrams and the like which people showed they could make. In the decade and a half since then, too much attention has continued to be given to the methods overlooking the greater importance of attitudes, behaviour, facilitation, power relations and process.

Methodological pluralism works best

Mixing methods and approaches – 'complementary method-

ologies' (e.g. Pimbert, this issue) – is the name of the game. If there is an appropriate fundamentalism it is that there is no fundamentalism, no one methodology, no one 'school' that is somehow 'right' and others wrong. So RRA, PRA, Reflect, Appreciative Inquiry, Planning for Real, and tens of other named approaches are all sources of ideas and learning, and all are evolving together. There can never be any definitive manual, but rather menus which ever grow and diversify, and processes and outcomes unique and transient each time. Methods and experiences provide ideas and ingredients and an invitation to mix, adapt, improvise, invent and create, again and again, each time new in each new context.

We run best on two legs – practice and critique

Practice without critique is slow to learn and improve (Cornwall and Guijt, this issue). Critique without practice lacks realism and risks irrelevance. To be grounded, learn and change, the two must iterate and spiral. The most penetrating and useful criticisms have come from practitioners who have walked in both worlds, the practical and the academic, and who have interrogated their own practice.

Scale with quality needs commitment, continuity and congruence

Most attempts to go to scale fast with participation have been abusive and disastrous. A culture and practice of participation has to be securely based on field practice, nurtured at all levels and supported from the top. Where quality with scale has been achieved, as with RIPS in Lindi and Mtwara in Tanzania and with the North West Mountain Programme in Vietnam, there has been continuity of committed staff who have stayed in place for years and years; long-term investment in relationships; and an evolving congruence in behaviour, attitudes and relationships between levels. (Sadly, even now in 2004, few lenders, donors or international NGOs behave as though they realise this).

Institutional change is a progression and an art

There is a spectrum of practice (Pimbert, this issue). There are no fixed formulae. Combinations of conditions and of actions differ: alliances, networking, seeing and seizing moments for action, devising and interpreting rules and procedures, finding and backing champions – these are among the means. We have learnt that institutional learning and change have to be continuous, and are vulnerable and ever in need of renewal.

Participatory professionalism challenges power

Much professionalism has been linear, standardised, top-

Box 7: November 1989. The second PRA in South India, in Kistagiri village, Mahbubnagar District, Andhra Pradesh, with Youth for Action and Sam Joseph.



Photo: Robert Chambers

Possibly the first participatory social map ever made. This photo is on the cover of *RRA Notes* 13.

Participants: Ranjit Ambastha, Cherry Leah Bagalanon, Girish Bharadwaj, Robert Chambers, Gordon Conway, S. Devaraj, John Devavaram, Aloysius Fernandez, Vidyadhara Gadgil, Mary Lou Higgins, Janardhan, Ravi Jayakaran, Sam Joseph, Thomas Joseph, Bernard J P, Rolf Lynton, Kamal Kar, Somesh Kumar, P Vijay Kumar, James Mascarenhas, A K Monnappa, Ravi Narayanan, Maricel C Piniero, Jules N Pretty, Radhakrishnan, K Rajendra Prasad, Vidya Ramachandran, B R Ravi Prakash, Eva Robinson, Anup Sarkar, Mr Satyamurthy, Parmesh Shah, Sheelu, Vani Shivaji, J Vimalnathan.

down and patriarchal. Participation challenges patriarchy and the power and security of many teachers. At the same time 'power over' frames and distorts realities, and all 'power over' deceives. The new participatory professionalism embraces self-critical reflection, and learning, unlearning and unceasing personal and professional change.

Where now? What next?

A recurring danger in development is giving up on ideas and approaches, which should instead be deepened and extended. So it is with participation. Like gender awareness, it has a permanent place in good practice as it evolves. But the distasteful vocabulary of the supermarket has infiltrated development-speak with 'flavour of the month', 'shelf life' and 'use-by date'. There is a sense that there must always be something new. Some might want to say 'Participation – been there, done that'. Or that if *Participatory Learning and Action* has been going for 16 years, its job must be done, or if it is not done, it has failed.

These would be profound errors. They would be to abandon a tree nursery when new seeds and species are being discovered and planted, the demand for saplings is

Anil C. Shah facilitating causal linkage diagramming by a farmer in Gujarat showing the impacts of irrigation which had come to his village a few years earlier. Anilbhai was at the time Chief Executive of AKRSP (India)



Photo: Robert Chambers

rising, and new land for planting is opening up. Participatory learning and action will always be nurseries for new approaches, methods, behaviours, attitudes and relationships, bringing with them new frontiers, understandings and priorities. Some words will be stable and stay but the realities they cover and what they mean will evolve. Some insights and practices will fade and be rediscovered. Others will be truly new. All will be ever transient and always taking new forms.

As *RRA* and *PLA Notes* have recorded, so much in the past decade and a half has been new, sometimes dramatically so. The current rapid rate and wide range of innovation seem likely to continue. There is a tantalising sense today, as there was in 1988, that much more is about to unfold. It has been a gift of participatory approaches and methods continually to enthral us with surprise, and continuously to point to new issues and potentials. Tackling and realising these is not a matter of a few years. There will never be closure. They are, rather, features of our human landscape, permanent but locally diverse, ever emergent and ever changing in form. The contributors to this issue have identified many and there are more. Thinking of issues and potentials, each of us can make our own list. You may wish to make yours before seeing mine. The question is: where should we be looking and what should we be exploring now?

One place is reviving good things that have slipped out of sight.

“The creativity, diversity and thrill of the visual methods was at first almost hypnotic. With time the centre of attention shifted to the extraordinary diversity of applications of not just the methods, but of participatory behaviours and approaches, by no means just those that carried the label PRA”

Renewing RRA²

So frenetic are fashions that the old clothes of development – the ‘flared trousers’ in David Mosse’s memorable phrase – are quickly abandoned and despised. Few are those today who admit to doing RRA. One consequence is falling again into old errors which were once corrected: the biases of rural development tourism (what is that?); the failure to observe and ask about things; the rush into methods (once it was questionnaires, now it is participatory mapping and the like) without introducing oneself, relaxing, chatting, establishing rapport. The art of the semi-structured interview has got buried: in what training that any reader has conducted or experienced in the past ten years has semi-structured interviewing featured? Certainly none in which I have been involved. Yet SSI, as it was known, was at the core of RRA. Days (too long!) were spent on it in some training. SSI remains a vital art form and skill, and the RRA will always have a part to play in good development practice. If we need to repackage and relabel to give a veneer of novelty, what was Rapid and Rural could become Realistic and Reflective. But whatever the letters are taken to stand for, the better practices of RRA deserve digging out, dusting down and putting back into service.

Other places to explore look more to new things in the future. For me, looking forward, three themes for participation stand out:

- Power and relationships
- Professional revolutions
- Personal change

They crosscut and are complementary. Has the time for them come, and will it come more and more?

Power and relationships

Only in the 2000s have power and relationships become a pervasive theme. A workshop in Dhaka (ActionAid, 2001) opened new ground in its exploration of power and how it can be transformed. Two guides rich in materials, methods and ideas have been published: *A New Weave of Power, People and Politics* (VeneKlasen and Miller, 2002) and *Reflect: Communication and Power* (Archer and Newman, 2003); and the book *Inclusive Aid: power and relationships in international development* (Groves and Hinton, 2004) present many relevant examples and insights. Transforming power, and empowerment of and self-empowerment by those who are weak, are being achieved in many ways in many contexts.

Some frontiers...

- confronting patriarchy, permeating and embedded as it is in societies, cultures and religions, as a near-universal challenge which needs to be named and transformed into gender equality with gains in wellbeing for men as well as women;
- givers becoming downwardly accountable to receivers;
- the assertion by lowers of non-negotiable principles as a means of reversing power relationships;
- processes through which groups of the weak come in from the margins, organise and act collectively to assert and claim their rights;
- life and relationships in total institutions like asylums, prisons, ships, boarding schools, hospitals, orphanages, old people’s homes, nunneries and monasteries;
- drug probationers and psychotherapy; and
- adults and children (Chawla and Johnson this issue)

Large organisations

Another area where this applies is large organisations, for example in government departments, political parties, the police, the private sector and trades unions. The literature on management is massive, but there has been little cross-fertilisation into such organisations and their relationships from the sort of experiences that have been reported in *RRA* and *PLA Notes*. Softening hierarchy and making relationships more congruent within and between top management, middle management, and the front line is an area where participatory approaches and methods have much to contribute.

Power from below

Power from below is taking new participatory forms and these are growing. More and more forms of participatory

² I am grateful to Andrea Cornwall for drawing my attention to this.

Box 8: Community-led total sanitation: 'They Can Do It' and the power of reversals

The methodology of community-led total sanitation (CLTS) by rural communities was pioneered and evolved in 2000 by Kamal Kar and colleagues with Water Aid and the Bangladesh NGO VERC. By mid 2004 it had spread to probably over 2,000 communities in Bangladesh, and to India, Cambodia, Mongolia and other countries, and starts had been made in Indonesia, Nepal, Mozambique, Uganda and Zambia. In the CLTS process community members are facilitated to do their own appraisal of open defecation. They map it, do transects and observe it, calculate the quantities produced, analyse pathways of contamination through dirt, flies and animals, and estimate how much each person ingests each day. Disgust, shame, religious precepts for cleanliness, and self-respect then commonly combine in a decision that open defecation must stop. People dig latrines and construct them according to local designs. Some are shared. Those who are better off often help the poorer and landless with space and materials. This generates social solidarity and enhances cooperation within the community. Once open defecation has ended, communities put up boards proudly proclaiming the fact. NGOs and governments support their own staff and also community catalysts and consultants to spread CLTS. And in Bangladesh imams preach in favour of it.

All in the community gain in wellbeing and health, especially women, children, and the poorer. Women in South Asia are liberated from the 'before dawn or after sunset'

constraint of custom. Evidence to date is that medical expenses and days lost to sickness are sharply, even dramatically, reduced. Total sanitation is, it seems, maintained through social pressures and the common interests of all, poorer and less poor alike.

CLTS springs from and combines much of what has been learnt in recent years, not least about the capabilities of local people, that 'They Can Do It'. It replaces costlier hardware subsidy-driven programmes, which lead to the lower benefits of partial sanitation. The PRA local analysis and action is cheaper and brings the bigger gains of total sanitation, and brings them for all, richer and poorer alike. Social solidarity from CLTS has triggered other local initiatives, for example to achieve primary schooling for all children, or measures for flood proofing, led by the leaders who emerge in the CLTS process. CLTS is also being used as an entry point for wider livelihood programmes.

CLTS demands reversals of mindset and practice: professional, from standardised blueprint engineering designs and controls to diverse local designs and ownership; institutional, from top-down target-driven development judged by budgets spent and latrines constructed to bottom-up behaviour-led development judged by the end of open defecation; philanthropic, from the view that the poorest must be subsidised to recognising that they are best helped within their own communities. Above all, these combine as personal challenges to policy-makers and

practitioners, whether in governments, aid agencies, or NGOs, to recognise that any programme of subsidies for hardware, or even any hint of one, inhibits, slows, stops and even prevents CLTS, as tragically it has done in some contexts.

CLTS is vulnerable. Sabotage can be inadvertent by those with 'normal' mindsets and beliefs. It can also be conscious by those with vested interests: by professionals who promote and gain from standardised and costly hardware; by bureaucrats, whether lenders, donors or Government, who seek the benefits and prestige of big budgets and rapid disbursement; and by organisations and by politicians for whom hardware subsidies provide patronage and rents.

CLTS could play a big part in achieving or overachieving the Millennium Development Goal of halving the proportion of those without affordable access to sanitation by 2015. But to do this requires not just promotion, but also, and vitally, that professionals, bureaucrats and politicians reverse their mindsets, reflexes and behaviours. They need vision, guts, realism and above all self-restraint. Many other good participatory processes have been subverted and debased in going to scale. Could CLTS be an exception, or will 'normal' mindsets and motivations prove too strong? The challenge is personal for all who are involved, and as huge as the opportunity. For CLTS see Kar (2003).

governance outside formal democratic systems have been evolved and are spreading (e.g. Gaventa; Patel; and Pettit and Musyoki, this issue). Social movements are becoming more prominent. Farmer Field Schools for Integrated Pest Management illustrate how a participatory intervention that meets a widespread need can coalesce into a popular campaign and movement with political clout (Pimbert, this issue). With increasing emphasis on citizenship, rights, advocacy and popular organisation, power from below seems set on an upward trajectory, at least in the commitment and inventiveness it deserves and receives.

Transforming power from above

In all these domains, the first common reflex is to focus on

empowering the weak. The bigger frontier and opportunity is often the behaviour and attitudes of the strong: of the dominant males and their institutions; of the lenders and donors; of those with property and wealth; of those invested with pastoral, custodial, disciplinary, didactic, therapeutic or formative roles – priests, warders, police, teachers, therapists, parents. The challenge is to find ways in which they can transform their power over others and use it to empower those others, and come to experience that transformation as fine and fulfilling for themselves.

Professional revolutions

RRA Notes and *PLA Notes* have contributed much concerning methodology. Article after article has presented new ways

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of doing things. These have often challenged normal dominant professional points of view. Now in addition to methodology, we have the new focus on power and relationships provoking changes across and between organisations, institutions, disciplines and professions. In this ferment, we may be surprised by the range and radicalism of some of the revolutions in professional outlooks, methods and behaviours that will follow. Three potentials are:

Participatory numbers

The association of participatory approaches and methods with qualitative insights has sustained a failure to recognise the significance of the many ways participation can generate good quantitative data (see e.g. *PLA Notes* 47). Opportunities here are for more accurate numbers, calibrating and qualifying official statistics, like the evident undercount of some 35% in the Malawi census of rural population (Barahona and Levy, 2003: 4-7)); for aggregating poor people's priorities; for empowering people and communities through their own statistics and analysis; and for replacing many questionnaires with cheaper, more accurate, more insightful, less time-consuming and less purely extractive methods. Breakthroughs are coming thick and fast and the future is wide open. At a conference on poverty research in Toronto in April 2004, eight of the 14 papers reported on the use of wealth or wellbeing ranking. Unrecognised by many mainstream professionals the challenge and exhilaration of a methodological revolution are upon us (see also Pettit and White, this issue).

Approaches and curricula in training and education

Participatory approaches and methods of the sort reported and explored in *Participatory Learning and Action* are quite rare in secondary and tertiary education around the world (Archer and Goreth, this issue; *PLA Notes* 48). Skills with words (reading, writing, speaking, listening) and mathe-

matics are prominent. The absence of analytical diagramming from school and university curricula is little short of bizarre when it is so pervasive in PRA and so superior for the presentation and analysis of many forms of diversity and complexity. Also much of the emphasis remains on teaching rather than learning. Too often it is true that 'by the time people have left university, the damage has been done'. The implications are radical: for curricula from primary onwards to include PRA-type analytical diagramming; and for teachers and lecturers to shift emphasis from didactic teaching to facilitating participatory and experiential learning.

Participation, poverty and human rights

Participatory Poverty Assessments initially seemed to promise revolutionary impact, putting first the realities and priorities of poor people. In practice, when they have been one-off exercises, their impact, though evident, has been quite limited. For their part, Participatory Human Rights Assessments are in their infancy. Enough is now known to suggest three measures to turn things more on their heads, and to sharpen impact:

- to make PPAs and PHRAs not one-offs but continuous, iterative processes as in UPPAP (the Uganda Participatory Poverty Assessment Process);
- to incorporate participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E), especially for human rights and gender relations, for example as pioneered by NESA (New Entity for Social Action) in South India where women keep visual diaries; and
- to involve policy-makers and decision-makers as researcher/facilitators in the fieldwork, with direct learning by officials, lenders and donors.

Just how powerful and transformative direct participatory engagement can be has been demonstrated in Tanzania, where SDC [insert full name] staff, after training as participatory researchers, spent whole days working with and helping very poor people, provoking remarks like 'I've worked in rural villages for more than 20 years, but I have never had an experience like this' (Jupp 2004: 5; also SDC 2003).

The personal

Personal change

Personal change underlies and is often a precondition for institutional, professional and policy change. Attitudes and behaviour have been constantly reaffirmed as central to good facilitation and participation. There will always be much here

to explore, to learn and to celebrate. Reflexivity – being self-critically aware and questioning one's behaviour, attitudes, mindsets, values, beliefs, predispositions and relationships – has been strikingly weak in development discourse and literature, and is not yet prominent in writings about participation (but see e.g. McGee, 2002). One sign that this is changing is the increasing attention given to codes of behaviour to overcome ethical blocks (e.g. Chawla and Johnson, this issue). Personal ethics may always be a last frontier.

Pedagogies for the non-oppressed

Using this phrase requires an apology to Paulo Freire, but I dare to hope that were he alive he might approve. Much, perhaps most, change for the better, will come from below, from social movements, democratic processes, popular pressures, protests and confrontations. But much change too can come from above. Rights-based approaches can be reinforced and complemented by obligations-based approaches. These apply most to the powerful and the rich, how they see things, what drives them, what they perceive as the good life, and what they do and do not do. The time has come to direct more attention to them. Immersions (Eyben, 2004; Irvine et al, 2004) with direct experiential learning from and with poor people, have a part to play, and promise to be a wave of the future. We need, too, to find more ways in which the rich and powerful can come to welcome the redistribution of wealth and power, and to find forms of responsible wellbeing for themselves by behaving, relating and being in new ways.

Vision and transformation.

Taking a long perspective, we can ask what the 21st century project should be, and what part participation could and should have in it. So many concerns are vital: the future of the state; global governance; transnational corporations and the market; Northern subsidies and quotas which protect the rich and impoverish the poor; security, energy, the environ-

ment and climate change; the new imperialism and WMD of the United States and its acolytes; justice and peace for the Palestinians and other oppressed peoples; international migration; social exclusion and injustice; urban regeneration; the brutalisation of children and young people... and permeating these pathologies of power, perceptions and hypocrisies. We can all add to the list.

All these have one thing in common: the dimension of human agency. They are determined by what we do and do not do. By showing what people can do, and the difference people can make, past contributions to *RRA* and *PLA Notes* offer a beacon of hope. Inspiring examples, many of them mentioned in this issue, describe actions that have led to good change. Holly Ashley asked me: 'Is there a wider vision of the future where participatory ethics and practice become the bedrock for our sense of global citizenship and custodianship?' I like the idea of participatory ethics. They can have a bearing at all levels, between all levels, and in all domains. They point to what we can and should do individually and collectively, locally, nationally and globally: a great lesson of participation is our power to make a difference both through individual 'power to' and through collective 'power with'. And again and again, that action and that good change have been driven and inspired by imagination, commitment, critical awareness, courage, creativity and above all vision. Participatory methods, approaches, values and behaviours affirm these qualities, and express them. There is a primacy here of practice, and of experiential learning, which revitalises with new energy and enthusiasm and restores hope. Faith and action together expand the boundaries of the possible. Our vision can be of innumerable small personal actions and changes that build up and combine to transform our world. The future can be brilliant if we make it so. And we know where to start. It was Gandhi who gave us the challenge:

You must become the change you wish to see in the world.

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